Standardizing Pennsylvania German Orthography

By ARTHUR D. GRAEFF

Even the casual observor must be aware of the revival of interest in the history, culture and folklore of the Pennsylvania Germans. This renaissance has manifested itself in many forms during recent years, and there are signs that, at last, tardy recognition will be given to the part which these people have played in making America and in making America great.

The latest phase of this revival takes the form of an attempt to establish a uniform system of spelling for the Pennsylvania German dialect. All persons who come in contact with dialectal writings will readily agree that some standardization is necessary. No two writers use the same system of spelling and very few, if any, are consistent in the use of the particular method which they have adopted. One contributor, whose dialectal verses have been published in many journals, has admitted that he has spelled the same word in ten different ways.

Heretofore each writer invented his own orthography. Since nothing was right, nothing was wrong. The result could only be a sort of linguistic anarchy, causing the dialect to break into tiny language islands, which, in their turn, served only to add to the confusion already inherent in the tongue. Add to this the many variations which came with the original settlers, from the Palatinate; from Swabia; Bavaria; Switzerland; the French influence and the gradual absorption of Indian and English words and the marvel of it all is that the dialect has survived at all.

But if the writers cannot agree with each other or be consistent with themselves, how can the layman be expected to read the many unfamiliar combinations of letters which are supposed to form words for him? An elderly lady who lived on South Mountain remarked to me—"Ich bin iwwel ab. Ich kann Englisch leese owwer net schwetza, und ich kann Deitch schwetza owwer net leese." (I can read English but cannot speak it, and I can speak German and can't read it.) For generations many, perhaps most, of the Pennsylvania Germans whose ancestors helped to found this republic, were deprived of the opportunity to learn anything from the printed page unless by the tedious method of translating English words into the language in which they were accustomed to think.

A spelling-class in the oldtime school.
From Horne's PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN MANUAL

What a tragedy!

"Open Sesame" they might cry but the doors to the labyrinth remained closed. For them no sublimated poetry; no vicarious journeys into the Land-of-Make-Believe; no science; no history—no rapture.

"For knowledge, to their eyes,
Rich with the spoils of time,
Did ne'er unfold."

Who will attempt to estimate the loss to American culture which resulted when hundreds of thousands of Americans were denied an opportunity to add to it? And then, as if to add insult to injury, unsympathetic person dubbed them "Dumb Dutch."

There have been several attempts in the past to achieve some degree of uniformity in the spelling and use of the dialect. Learned scholars have studied the origins of the tongue and much has been written about the etymology of words and phrases. Dr. S. S. Haldeman and Dr. M. D. Learned have shown us the sources from which the dialect developed. A number of writers have compiled dialectal lexicons, adopting arbitrary methods of spelling. Most of these dictionaries are at variance with each other, thereby adding to the confusion. Some compilers were familiar with German sound values and therefore adhered to the German orthography, others knew little or no German and consequently employed an English phonetic system. Still others attempted a compromise between the two.

The first dictionary was compiled by Dr. A. R. Horne of Kutztown in Berks County in 1875. Dr. Horne was a German scholar but recognizing the influence of English, spelled his words with English sound values. The author explained that he adopted this procedure because he hoped to guide Pennsylvania Germans into the use of English. His work, therefore, can hardly be considered as an effort to standardize the spelling of the German.

A few years after Horne's Pennsylvania German Manual appeared, E. H. Rauch, author of the Father Abraham letters, under the pen name of Pit Schweffelbrenner published his Pennsylvania Dutch Handbook (1879). Mr. Rauch was not a German scholar. The Handbook contains less than 5000 words including English admixtures. His system of spelling is based entirely upon English sound values. The German word "Ehr" meaning honor becomes Air and the possessive pronoun "Mein" becomes Mine as in English. From the standpoint of orthography Rauch's book is limited in value because the student must know how to spell the word before he can find it in the dictionary, and there are no rules to guide him except the varied and uncertain English sound values.

Dialectal writers who were Rauch's contemporaries scoffed at the style of the Pit Schweffelbrenner letters and Rauch found himself involved in many controversies in his efforts to defend his system. One of his chief critics was Colonel Thomas Zimmerman of Reading, who gained international recognition for his lyrical verses and translations into the dialect. Zimmerman adhered to the German spelling and his writings delight many readers even to this day. So too another contemporary of Rauch's, the Reverend Henry Harbaugh, held to German sound values in the construction of his immortal "Heemweh" and other beautiful poems.

Here we have one of the fundamental questions which must determine the general principles upon which a standard orthography must be based. The writings of Keller, Zimmerman and Harbaugh and others who employed German phonetics have survived the generation during which they were written, but, so too, has Rauch's translation of the Ghost Scene from Hamlet "Ich bin deim dawdy si spook" lived on in spite of its queer English spelling of German words. In his own day Pit Schweffelbrenner had a greater number of readers than any of his contemporaries could boast. This would seem to argue that his system was better adapted to the great masses of people, but it must be borne in mind that men like Keller, Harbaugh, Ziegler, Zimmerman and others wrote the type of materials which had limited appeal because of the sublimation of subject matter.

The third dictionary was published in 1895. It was the work of Mr. J. C. Lins. The author, like Dr. A. R. Horne, was interested only in aiding "such Pennsylvania Germans as are anxious to acquire a knowledge of the English language." Lins made no effort to standardize the spelling.

Still another curious attempt at spelling dialectal words came from the pen of Dr. W. J. Hoffman in 1888. He listed the words found in Horne's Manual but spelled them according to the alphabet used by the Bureau of American Ethnology in recording Indian tongues.

Some writers have appended glossaries to their works, hoping thereby, to enable the reader to understand puzzling spelling or vocabulary. This system was employed by Daniel Miller in his volumes entitled the "Pennsylvania German." In his "Lewendiche Stimme aus Pennsilveni" (1929), Heinz Kloss, writing the Pennsylvania dialect for readers in Germany, appended a glossary of English words which crept into the dialect and spelled those words with German sound values.

A unique method was employed by William S. Troxell (Pumpernickle Bill) in his anthology of dialect verse entitled "Aus Pennsylfawnia" (1938). In this book all statements appear in both English and Pennsylvania German thereby enabling the reader to check one form of expression against another. This system, although cumbersome, has its advantages where simple prose is used but becomes unwieldy in verse or in dialogue.

The most ambitious attempt to standardize the spelling and use of the dialect was made twenty years ago when Mr. M. B. Lambert published his Dictionary of Non-English Words of the Pennsylvania-German dialect. More than 16,000 words are listed in this excellent study and most of them are shown with their German equivalents. Mr. Lambert is a German scholar and, for the greater part of his orthography, German sound values are employed. Since the publication of Lambert's Dictionary, Reverend Thomas R. Brendle of Egypt, Pennsylvania, has collected nearly 2000 additional dialectal words which are not included in Lambert's list. Certainly a dialect possessing 18,000 unadulterated words provides an excellent vehicle for expression and is worth of being salvaged by standardization of its use.

The lack of uniformity which marked dialectal writings generations ago is still a problem today. Present day writers differ from those of Rauch's day only in that they are more confused than ever and most of them are not satisfied, even with their own system. Col. Thomas Harter gained an extensive following with his Boonastiel letters but persons whose academic training made them familiar with German found Harter's spelling shocking to the eye.

William S. Troxell, writing under the name Pumpernickle Bill has an immense following among the Pennsylvania German for whom he has penned daily sketches in his column in the Allentown Morning Call. Over a period of more than thirteen years Mr. Troxell has educated many folks to his peculiar type of spelling. The orthography is similar to that of Rauch and bears little resemblance to German spelling. English sound values are used, somewhat arbitrarily, so that persons who do not have a daily contact with the column in the Call find great difficulty in following the Troxell newsettes.

The same newspaper carries a dialect feature entitled " 'S Deitsch Eck" edited by Dr. P. A. Barba, professor of German in Muhlenberg College. All dialectal materials appearing there must pass the inspection of Dr. Barba who is an excellent German scholar. Quite naturally the spelling assumes a closer resumblance to German forms.

Mr. Michael A. Gruber of Washington, D. C., who has written many charming poems based upon his early life in North Heidelberg Township, Berks County, contends that German sound values should be used wherever possible and he points out that those who ignore the German values do so because they are not familiar with the mother tongue. Mr. H. K. Landis, of Landis Valley Museum, who writes under the pen name "Der Gros Henner" submits that rules and syntax would hamper expression in the dialect. "We have book English, classroom English, every day English and bar-room English. In the same way with the dutch . . ." And in like manner writers of every type and description today are puzzled.

In order to attempt to find some way out of the confusion a group of writers and scholars interested in the dialect gathered at Reading on December 10, 1938. This meeting was summoned by Dr. Clyde Stine of Lebanon Valley College. It was attended by a number of persons who had sensed the need of some standards upon which to base the spelling of Pennsylvania German.

The Reading meeting was held as a preliminary conference only. The small group of men who attended the Reading meeting realized that the problem could not be solved by their small group. All persons interested in the movement would have to be consulted before any action could be effective.

However, past experience had shown that conferences held by large groups frequently resulted in stalemate because of sharp clashes of opinion over minor details, the larger aspects of the problem often being lost sight of in quibbling over inconsequential details.

Accordingly, the group assembled at Reading decided upon a program which was to be presented for approval, modification or disapproval at a larger assembly.

Hershey, Pennsylvania, was agreed upon as the place for the larger conference. The committee availed itself of the invitation extended by Dr. A. R. Breitenstein, Dean of Hershey Junior College. The date was set for Saturday, January 28, 1939 and invitations were sent out to every person known to be interested in the use of the Pennsylvania German dialect.

The response to the invitations was highly gratifying. The assemblage at Hershey represented every major field of activity in which the use of the dialect is involved. (1)

The general system which had been prepared at the Reading meeting was presented by Dr. Preston A. Barba of Muhlenberg College. The German sound values form the basis of the system which was proposed and discussed. However, the final result of the efforts will formulate an eclectic system of spelling, using English as well as German phonetics, in cases where the dialect has undergone a clearly marked change from its German origins. Also there are sounds which defy reproduction under either system and in such cases new letter combinations must be used.

The conference was carried on in a spirit of compromise with free debate and many eneral conclusions were reached. It was agreed that the use of the German umlaut must be abandoned as impractical from the standpoint of type-setting in English presses; that the use of "y" as a terminal letter and of "j" as a medial should be discouraged except in words with religious connotations such as "Majestaet". The too frequent use of the apostrophe to indicate elision was deplored and the general principle of eliminating unnecessary letters was approved.

Vowels and consonants are to receive their original German values but are to be used in conformity with the sound they express in the dialect. Thus the German Traum becomes Draam and Knecht becomes Gnecht.

Nouns are to be capitalized as in German and the "sch" preserved as the spelling of the sibilant. The letter "v" is to be used as an initial letter only when its German original is spelled in that way, as in viel, or verkauf. In all other cases the "f" is to be used.

The use of double letters presents one of the great difficulties. The double a (aa) was accepted as expressing the sound of aw in English (draw). As a contraction of the German auch becomes aa in Pennsylvania German. Er iss aa doh. This may shock the eye at first but it appears to have more merit than ah or aw, the possible alternatives. The double e (ee) was given the long a sound. Thus the word "to know" becomes wees. There are several exceptions to this rule however. Baum in the singular becomes baem in the plural for the sake of retaining some degree of similarity to its singular form. Also in words like "to go"—"geh" is permitted in order to retain the stem of the parent word. These are but a few of the problems which were presented at Hershey.

The movement was sponsored by members of both the Pennsylvania German Society and the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society. Upon the motion of Dr. Hartman the principles agreed upon at Hershey were unanimously endorsed by the members of the conference as representing a working basis for further study and organization.

(1.)—For the list of those present see the ECK for Feb. 4, 1939.

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Der Mutter Ihre Daag

Die Feierdaage im me Yohr
Sin viel, vun alle Aarte;
Far des un sell, das eemol waar,
Un sache zu erwaarte.

Far Patriotte lang schun dot,
Ihr Blut in Schlacht vergosse;
Far Weise, die in Hungers Not
Die Welt hen lang verlosse.

Far Schtaatsleit, die in ihrem Lewe
En Sarge hen gedraage;
Die Welt ken Dank hot ihne gewwe
Bis lang waar'n sie begraawe.

Der schenscht, das im Kallener schteht
En Weibsperson dutt ehre;
Sie iss bekannt uf weit un breet,
Zu allem Mensch dutt g'heere.

Sie hot far uns en Schmaerz gedraage
Mitaus emol gewinselt;
Doch hot sie oftmols nasse Aage,
Wann unsereens net blinselt.

So loss uns uf den Daag sie b'suche,
Die weil sie iss noch do;
Un frisch die Mutterlieb versuche,
Des macht sie haerzlich froh.

Hot sie der lang, lang Weg genumme,
Un rugt mit Gottes Sege,
Loss uns en Schtrauss vun scheene
Blumme
Uf ihre Graab hielege.

—LLOYD A. MOLL

Mer lebt yuscht eemol in der Welt

**"Mer lebt yuscht eemol in der Welt;
Was macht's dann aus—mer geht net weit;
Mer iss lang dod—un was dennoh?
Mer lebt dann gut—mer lebt yuscht heit!"**

**Hoscht du so'n Red net oft schun g'heert?
Was denkscht devun? 'S iss net viel drin!
'N Haerz voll Welt, des steicht net hoch,
Un geht net recht von Aabeginn!**

**Mer lebt yuscht eemol in der Welt,
Dann kummt die Nacht—un wu geht's naus?
'S kummt all druf aa, was du warscht do —
Hoscht nichs gezaehlt, dann stehscht juscht draus.**

**Juscht eemol gehscht du uf deim Weg;
Kummscht nimmi zerick un iwwer dhu,
Was hoscht verfehlt—was des mag sei!
Verwas gebscht net es Bescht dezu?**

**'S iss net de waert, dass mer sich blufft
Un saagt mer waer, was mer net iss;
So 'n Dummheet, die geht yo net weit
Mer fooled sich yuscht—des iss gewiss!**

**Gott kennt die Leit—vergess des net—
Wer sucht recht geh, dem schteht er bei;
Er nemmt kenn Blab un losst's hie geh;
Was 'd heit uffpickscht, iss marye dei.**

**Was machscht dich do, des bischt nord dart;
'S nemmt meh als Wunsch—du musscht aa dhu—
Mer waerd mit dhu: duscht meh, waerscht meh—
Dann schafft's schee aus—am Owed Ruh.**

—REVEREND CHARLES A. BUTZ